Semiotics for Beginners

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Strengths of Semiotic Analysis

Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress argue that unlike many academic disciplines, 'semiotics offers the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it' (Hodge & Kress 1988, 1). Semiotics provides us with a unifying conceptual framework and a set of methods and terms which can be used 'across the full range of signifying practices: gesture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television, and so on' (Turner 1992, 17).

Semiotics is invaluable if we wish to look beyond the manifest content of texts. It is, for instance, well adapted to exploring connotative meanings. Structuralist semiotics seeks to look behind or beneath the surface of the observed in order to discover the underlying organization of phenomena. The more obvious the structural organization of a text or code may seem to be, the more difficult it may be to see beyond such surface features (Langholz Leymore 1975, 9). Searching for what is 'hidden' beneath the 'obvious' can lead to fruitful insights.

Whereas 'common-sense' insists that reality is independent of the signs which refer to it, semiotics emphasizes the role of sign systems in the construction of reality. John Hartley argues that 'every thing and every idea that we "know" is known through sign systems' (Hartley 1982, 33). He adds that 'the sign system determines the way in which we will see the referent, and referents are not pre-given entities with fixed determinate properties. That is not to say that the referent doesn't exist independently of its realization in a discourse' (*ibid.*, 34).

Semioticians argue that signs are related to their signifieds by social conventions which we learn. We become so used to such conventions in our use of various media that they seem 'natural', and it can be difficult for us to realize the conventional nature of such relationships. When we take these relationships for granted we treat the signified as unmediated or 'transparent', as when we interpret television or photography as 'a window on the world'.

This is an ideological issue, since, as Victor Burgin notes, 'an ideology is the sum of taken-for-granted realities of everyday life' (Burgin 1982, 46). Semiotics can help to make us aware of what we take for granted in representing the world, reminding us that we are always dealing with signs, not with an unmediated objective reality, and that sign systems are involved in the construction of meaning. As Valentin Volosinov declared: 'Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too' (cited in Gardiner 1992, 14). Sign systems help to 'naturalize and reinforce a particular view of reality' (Gardiner 1992, 147). Signs function to persuade as well as to refer. Consequently, semiotic analysis always involves ideological analysis. If signs do not merely reflect reality but are involved in its construction then those who control the sign systems control the construction of reality. This is not accomplished without struggle. As John Hartley comments, 'contending social forces seek to "fix" the meaning-potential of each sign with an evaluative accent conducive to their particular interests' and at the same time try to present evaluative differences as differences in fact (Hartley 1982, 23, 24). For Roland Barthes various codes contribute to reproducing bourgeois ideology, making it seem natural, proper and inevitable (Hawkes 1977, 107). One need not be a Marxist to appreciate that it can be liberating to become aware of whose view of reality is being privileged in the process. Thwaites *et al.* see the task of semiotic analysis as being 'to *denaturalise* the text, demonstrating that its commonsense meanings are not givens, but the product of ideological coding' (Thwaites *et al.* 1994, 161).

In the study of the mass media, semiotic approaches can draw our attention to such taken-for-granted practices as the classic Hollywood convention of 'invisible editing' which is still the dominant editing style in popular cinema and television. Semiotic treatments can make us aware that this is a manipulative convention which we have learned to accept as 'natural' in film and television. More broadly, Pierre Guiraud argued that 'it is doubtless one of the main tasks of semiology to establish the existence of systems in apparently a-systematic modes of signification' (Guiraud 1975, 30). In relation to the mass media, semiotics has made distinctive theoretical contributions. In association with psychoanalysis, semiotics also introduced the theory of 'the positioning of the subject' (the spectator) in relation to the filmic text (Hayward 1996, 19, 312, 353). Whilst this structuralist stance may have reinforced the myth of the irresistibility of media influence, the emphasis of social semioticians on diversity of interpretation (within social parameters) has countered the earlier tendency to equate 'content' with meaning and to translate this directly to 'media effects'.

As an approach to communication which focuses on meaning and interpretation, semiotics challenges the reductive transmission model which equates meaning with 'message' (or content). Signs do not just 'convey' meanings, but constitute a medium in which meanings are *constructed*. Semiotics helps us to realise that meaning is not passively absorbed but arises only in the active process of

interpretation. In relation to printed advertisements, William Leiss and his colleagues note:

> The semiological approach... suggests that the meaning of an ad does not float on the surface just waiting to be internalized by the viewer, but is built up out of the ways that different signs are organized and related to each other, both within the ad and through external references to wider belief systems. More specifically, for advertising to create meaning, the reader or the viewer has to do some 'work'. Because the meaning is not lying there on the page, one has to make an effort to grasp it. (Leiss *et al.* 1990, 201-2)

Much the same could be said of texts in other genres and media. The meanings generated by a single sign are multiple. Semiotics highlights 'the infinite richness of interpretation which... signs are open to' (Sturrock 1986, 101). Volosinov referred to the *multi-accentuality* of the sign - the potential for diverse interpretations of the same sign according to particular social and historical contexts. Whilst the emphasis on the role of the interpreters of a text has helped to reduce the romantic obsession with the role of the author (e.g. the *auteur* in film), the semiotic notion of intertextuality (highlighting what texts owe to other texts), has contributed to undermining the myth of 'originality'. Individuals are not unconstrained in their construction of meanings. As Stuart Hall puts it, our 'systems of signs... *speak us* as much as we speak in and through them' (Hall 1977, 328).

'Common-sense' suggests that 'I' am a unique individual with a stable, unified identity. Semiotics can help us to realise that such notions are created and maintained by our engagement with sign systems: our sense of identity is established through signs. We derive a sense of 'self' from drawing upon conventional, pre-existing repertoires of signs and codes which we did not ourselves create. We are thus the *subjects* of social semiotic processes - created by them. Pierre Guiraud goes further: 'Man [*sic*] is the vehicle and the substance of the sign, he is both the signifier and the signified; in fact, he is a sign and therefore a convention' (Guiraud 1975, 83). The postmodernist notion of fragmented and shifting identities may provide a useful corrective to the myth of the unified self. But unlike those postmodernist stances which simply celebrate radical relativism, semiotics can help us to focus on *how* we make sense of ourselves, whilst social semiotics anchors us to the study of situated practices in the construction of identities and the part that our engagement with sign systems plays in such processes. Justin Lewis notes that 'we are part of a prearranged semiological world. From the cradle to the grave, we are encouraged by the shape of our environment to engage with the world of signifiers in particular ways' (Lewis 1991, 30).

Guy Cook argues that 'forty years ago, the method was a revolutionary one, and justly captured the intellectual imagination, not only for the added complexity it could bring to analysis but also for its political and philosophical implications. Its visions of cultures and cultural artefacts, no matter how superficially different, as fundamentally similar was a powerful weapon against racism and cultural chauvinism, and held out hope of the discovery of abstract structures universal in human culture' (Cook 1992, 70-71). Semiotics has sought to study cultural artifacts and practices of whatever kind on the basis of unified principles, at its best bringing some coherence to media and cultural studies. It has encouraged the 'decoding' of a wide variety of popular cultural phenomena with the same seriousness traditionally reserved for the literary, artistic and musical canon. Semiotics may encourage us not to dismiss a particular medium as of less worth than another: literary and film critics often regard television as of less worth than prose fiction or 'artistic' film. To élitist literary critics, of course, this would be a weakness of semiotics. Potentially, semiotics could help us to realize differences as well as similarities between various media. It could help us to avoid the routine privileging of one semiotic mode over another, such as the spoken over the written or the verbal over the non-verbal. We need to recognize, as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen note, that 'different semiotic modes - the visual, the verbal, the gestural... have their potentialities, and their limitations' (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 31). Such a realization could lead to the recognition of the importance of new literacies in a changing semiotic ecology.

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